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Entertainment

Yearwood returning to her country roots

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continued to pursue more of a pop direction on 1998's "Where Your Road Leads" and saw that album go platinum.

But Yearwood essentially has returned to her roots with "Real Live Woman," which eight weeks after its release is No. 115 on the Billboard pop chart and No. 11 on the country chart. With its earthy sound, the new record recalls the more country-oriented material of such early Yearwood albums as "Hearts In Armor" and "The Song Remembers When."

Beyond the music, "Real Live Woman" will undoubtedly draw considerable attention because of recent events in Yearwood's life. She was divorced last year from Mavericks' bassist Robert Reynolds, and the new disc includes several songs dealing with romantic turmoil. For instance, "Where Are You Now," co-written by Richey and Mary Chapin Carpenter, finds the woman aching over the loss of a love she thought would last forever. At the other end of the spectrum is "I'm Still Alive," where Yearwood sings of the satisfaction that comes with realizing there is life after a broken romance.

And while it's tempting to suspect "Woman's" songs detail Yearwood's own experiences, she cautions not to read too much into her lyrics.

"If you've ever been through any kind of breakup, there are days when you feel all those emotions," Yearwood says, referring specifically to the songs "Where Are You Now" and "I'm Still Alive." "There are days when you feel very independent and strong, and then the next day you might think, 'I've made the hugest mistake of my life.' That's a human response.

"There's no way to say you don't choose songs based on a gut reaction, because you do. That means you're going to choose songs that you can somehow relate to, or you can pour yourself into it if it strikes you for some reason. So there's no way to say that this album has nothing to do with what I've been through. The danger is in thinking that it's literal. . . . If you go back and listen to all of my albums, and if you think they are all directly related to my personal life, you would think I've spent my entire adult life depressed."

Musically, Yearwood says "Real Live Woman" "was not a statement to say, 'I'm getting too pop. I need to go back to what I'm supposed to do.' It was a very conscious decision to make a more organic-sounding record. That's what I really wanted it to sound like."

She recognizes that the disc runs counter to much of what's dominating the country airwaves these days. "There is a real huge distinction between the kind of numbers Faith Hill and Shania Twain are selling and what most of the rest of country music is selling," Yearwood says. "And I just wanted to make a record that country music could say is theirs, that they could say, 'This is country.'

"For me, that doesn't mean I made a really traditional country album, because I don't think I could pull that off. I don't think that's really what I'm about. But I do think that the album I made is probably the best representation of who I am musically. It's definitely country, but it's got that influence of [Linda] Ronstadt and the Eagles, all that stuff I grew up on. It really represents why I wanted to be a singer."

Yearwood's description of "Real Live Woman" is accurate. There is pure country in songs such as the peppy "Too Bad You're No Good" and the hearty ballads "I'm Still Alive" and the title track. But on "One Love," her sound takes a distinctly bluesy tone, while her cover of Bruce Springsteen's "Sad Eyes" has a folky edge and her version of Ronstadt's "Try Me Again" pays homage to the country rock sound of the 1970s.

In making "Real Live Woman," Yearwood reunited with Garth Fundis, who had produced her first six studio discs, before she tabbed Tony Brown for "Where Your Road Leads." Fundis wasn't Yearwood's first choice. "I think that I really tried not to go back to him," she admits.

"I feel like it's important for an artist, if they're going to grow, to change. . . . I didn't want to make the albums I had made before.

"I went to [Fundis] and told him that," Yearwood says. "So we agreed to just cut a couple of things together and see if we were able to kind of think outside of what we had done in the past. It went so well that we decided to make the whole album together."

Although Yearwood admits she has had her share of difficult moments during her breakup with Reynolds, she is happy now and believes she learned some important truths along the way.

"It kind of sounds like a lesson I should have learned before now, but at 35 years old, I finally feel like I've taken complete responsibility for myself," says the native of Monticello, Ga. "Maybe some of it's because of growing up in the South, but I spent a lot of my life trying to be, always singing about being this independent woman who does what she wants, but still kind of trying to please everybody else.

"I don't like controversy. I don't like confrontation. I don't want people to not like me. And you end up compromising yourself sometimes because of those things. So it has been a real eye-opening experience for me to say, at 35, 'I'm going to say what I think. I'm going to do what I think is right.' Some people will not understand. Some people will criticize. Some people might not like me. Musically, I'm going to do what I feel is right. It may not be what you expect me to do. It may not be what would be the obvious choice, but it's going to be honest and it's going to be what I think is right. And it's such a freeing experience to live life that way."

Trisha Yearwood will perform Wednesday night at the State Theatre Center for the Arts, 453 Northampton St., Easton. Doors will open at 7 p.m. and Kim Richey will open the show at 8 p.m. The show is sold out. 610-252-3132, www.statetheatre.org.

Alan Sculley is a free-lance writer.

Book Review

Critic's anthology shares wild ride of rock

"A Whore Just Like the Rest: The Music Writings of Richard Meltzer" by Richard Meltzer; Da Capo Press, $17.95, 575 pp.

By BRIAN McCOLLUM
KRT News Service

In case you had any doubt, Richard Meltzer and Lester Bangs practically invented rock criticism, as Meltzer himself asserts in typically daredevil style right from the get-go — first sentence — of his new anthology, "A Whore Just Like the Rest."

Upon staking his claim as the architect of rock writing, certainly the strangest strand of arts criticism to crest and crash within the course of two decades, Meltzer goes on to write, "Which, heck, I dangle as neither credit nor debit — just my way of saying hi."

"A Whore Just Like the Rest" is Meltzer's way of saying hi for 575 pages. Brash, visceral and reckless, Meltzer, Bangs and their colleagues at periodicals such as Creem and the Village Voice sculpted a writing style that sought to snare the primacy of the music they found themselves immersed in.

As revealed in this assortment of essays on rock's chameleonic orbit — late '60s psychedelia, New York punk, modern indie rock — Meltzer's 30-year career has been less an evolution than a colorful checkerboard. From writing 1970's ground-breaking "The Aesthetic of Rock" to hacking quickie blurbs on such artists as Anne Murray for the San Diego Reader, Meltzer has certifiably been there, done that.

His style is hyper-conversational, with sentences careening wildly, crammed with lots of "lotsa," "y'know" and ALL-CAPS EMPHASIS. Meltzer views rock not as an art deserving of traditional critical treatment, but as a wild ride to be joined.

Meltzer leaves no icon unturned, and his weird love-hate affairs with such luminaries as Lou Reed, John Lennon and even venerable Village Voice editor Robert Christgau provide insightful entertainment. In this age of pop as corporate stock option, there are few like him; Chuck Eddy comes to mind, but even his brand of subversion comes with a thoroughly modern ironic spin.

Throughout, Meltzer pays ample homage to his friend and peer Bangs, who since he died in 1982 has become something of a legend, probably the closest any rock critic has come to approaching the folklore status of the artists he wrote about.

Disc Reviews

EMINEM:
The Marshall Mathers LP
(Aftermath/Interscope)

He sounds a bit beleaguered, but hardly cowed. Eminem, the irrepressible white kid from Detroit who last year wielded a two-by-four called "The Slim Shady LP" to the cranium of a stupefied hip-hop nation with bracing results, has returned with another darkly humorous, take-no-prisoners collection sure to rattle parents and give professional worrywarts a new reason to cluck their (forked) tongues. "The Marshall Mathers LP" (titled after the fleet rapper's real name) is relentlessly provocative, and Eminem's distinctively nasal, perpetually put-upon voice is a lightning rod. His raps are not about blunts, 40s and (rhymes with witches). No, Eminem favors hyper-violent scenarios, which he skillfully spews on tracks such as "Kill You." But he's no simple sucka; he cagily addresses and deflects the controversy about his sometimes psychopathic lyrics by pointedly asking where responsibility lies (the snappy, double-edged "Who Knew," the portentous but engaging "The Way I Am"). On "The Real Slim Shady" he gets in his licks at boy bands ('N Sync is a favorite target), as well as music business polity (Will Smith, the Grammys) and back-scratching (he poses a riddle about Christina Aguilera: Carson Daly or Fred Durst?). And on his finest moment, "Stan," Eminem sensitively sketches the dynamics between himself and a deluded fan. (Nuance becomes him.) Now the bad news: Eminem is homophobic. Even a low-watt bulb like George W. knows better, and if Eminem's as smart as he thinks he is, he should too. Also, Eminem comes dangerously close to self-pity, and he overplays his hand on the wig out "Kim" (which tries, unsuccessfully, to be a "Bonnie and Clyde 97" update). Plus, his minions and friends are given too much rope near the end of the disc. Overall, though, Eminem fearlessly offers his version of the truth on "The Marshall Mathers LP," and that counts for a lot.

Len Righi

KID ROCK:
The History Of Rock
(Lava/Atlantic)

Ostensibly, "The History Of Rock" offers some back story on the Kid Rock phenomenon by compiling re-recorded and cleaned-up tracks from the days before he became known as a platinum-selling, classic-rock/rapping "Cowboy." The addition of a few newer tracks ("American Badass," "Abortion" and the cleverly titled "F*** That"), though, suggests the possibility of it merely being a cheap, fast way to get more K. Rock product on the shelves before he goes the way of Vanilla Ice — a tactic not exactly new in the music biz. It's really just a question of whether the older tracks are worthy of re-release. Redone versions of "Prodigal Son" and "My Oedipus Complex" are, being as successful fusions of white-boy rap and guitar rock as anything he's done since

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◀ Eminem ... another take-no-prisoners collection.

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